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Cover Page Footnote

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HAMISH HENDERSON AND NELSON MANDELA: NOTES FOR “RIVONIA”

Patrick Scott

In this, the first volume of *Studies in Scottish Literature* since the death of President Nelson Mandela, it seems appropriate to include Hamish Henderson's notes for his song “Rivonia,” written following the conviction of Mandela and seven co-defendants in the Rivonia trials of 1963-64. The notes are reproduced here by permission of the Estate of Hamish Henderson, both as documenting Henderson's longtime commitment to international human rights and as a memorial to Mandela's impact in Scotland. These notes form part of a small group of Henderson material that became separated from the main Hamish Henderson Archive (now in the Centre for Research Collections, Edinburgh University Library), when in the 1990s Henderson allowed Ross Roy to purchase some items, chiefly drafts of his *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica*, for the G. Ross Roy Collection at the University of South Carolina.¹

Henderson later recalled that he had sung the song first in 1963, soon after Mandela was arrested, but the song as fully developed, responding to the convictions and sentencing, clearly dates from the summer of 1964.² Mandela and others from *Umkhonto we Sizwe*, or Spear of the Nation (MK), the militant wing of the African National Congress (ANC), had been arrested at Lilliesleaf, a farmhouse at Rivonia, near Johannesburg, on July 11, 1963. He and ten others were charged with planning acts of sabotage and violent revolution against the South African

¹ On materials in South Carolina, see the Henderson exhibition catalogue (1998), at: http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/engl_facpub/314/. For an announcement and description of the main Henderson archive at Edinburgh University Library, see: <http://www.ed.ac.uk/news/2013/hendersonarchive080813>. I am grateful to Corey Gibson and Thomas Scott for reading this note in draft.

² Based on the dates of sentencing (June 12, 1964), referred to in the song's opening, and Mandela's speech (April 20, 1964), which Henderson also recalled as important for the genesis of the song: for Henderson's account, see Timothy Neat, *Hamish Henderson*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2009), 188.

regime, promoting communism, and receiving foreign funds for these purposes. Two of those accused escaped before the trial, and charges against a third were dismissed at trial. After a false start, and the re-drawing of the indictments, the trials opened in Pretoria on December 3, 1963; the verdict was announced on June 11, 1964, and sentences to life imprisonment announced on June 12. Because of the South African government's previous record in such political cases, the prosecution had already been condemned by the UN Security Council, and the eyes of the world were on the trial throughout, but it was Mandela's extraordinary three-hour speech for the defense, on April 20, that captured international attention, especially for its ringing conclusion:

During my lifetime, I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. ... I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.

For Henderson, Mandela's closing words surely carried echoes of the Declaration of Arbroath ("freedom ... which no honest man gives up but with life itself") and of Burns's "Scots wha hae" ("Let us do or die"), just as for American observers they echoed Patrick Henry ("Give me liberty or give me death").

In his 2013 Hamish Henderson Memorial Lecture, Eberhard Bort has summarized the story of Henderson's response to the Rivonia trial verdict and sentences:

His song "The Men of Rivonia" came together very quickly. He used the tune of the Spanish republican Civil War song "Viva la Quince Brigada" with its refrain "Rumbala, rumbala, rumbala" ... He sang it first in Athens at a conference, then in the pubs and clubs closer to home; Dolina McLennan sang it in Edinburgh's Waverley Bar – and by September 1964 Pete Seeger had taken it up across in America. ...

It was published in America, in Italy, in the British folk magazine *Sing*. He had Roy Williamson and Ronnie Brown of the Corries record it, and sent several copies of the recording to Kunene [with the ANC in London]. ... [By January 22] the song had been forwarded to the ANC headquarters in Dar es Salaam.... It spent five months on the Tanzanian hit parade. And it reached as far as Roben Island where Nelson Mandela heard it.³

³ Eberhard Bort, "Hamish Henderson, Nelson Mandela, and the Fight Against Apartheid in South Africa," Hamish Henderson Memorial Lecture, June 7, 2013: <http://www.edinburghpeoplesfestival.org/eberhard-paddy-bort-hamish-henderson-nelson-mandela/>. Bill Smith, the third member of what was then the Corries Folk Trio, recently confirmed that the recording, included on the tribute album *A' The Bairns o' Adam* (Greentrax, 2003: CDTRAX244), was made in August 1964:

Henderson's awareness of South Africa went back to the 1940s.⁴ During the war, as a young intelligence officer, just before and during the battle of El Alamein, he had been attached to the 1st South African Division, later asserting "there was no question of apartheid on the battlefield."⁵ In March 1947, in the *Voice of Scotland*, he had criticized King George VI's recent speech on a royal tour in South Africa: "there is no place on earth where the black people are worse treated."⁶ When the all-white South African rugby team, the Springboks, played Scotland in Edinburgh, on December 6, 1969, protesters sang Henderson's song on the terraces of Murrayfield, and Henderson himself was later arrested. In 1990, at a demonstration celebrating Mandela's release from prison, he led a large Edinburgh crowd in singing "Rivonia," and he sang it for Mandela himself on October 9, 1993, when Mandela visited Glasgow to accept the symbolic Freedom of the City, which Glasgow had voted to award him in 1981.

Henderson's notes reproduced here must date from a very early stage in this story, representing perhaps a preliminary list of verses or more probably performance notes for one of the earliest times Henderson sang the song. The notes are undated, but written in ballpoint pen on a small airmail envelope, from the Hotel "Aegaion," Sounion, Greece, owned by Terlakis Bros, SA. Henderson was in Greece to attend the Fourth International Congress for Folk Narrative Research, held in Athens from September 1-September 6, 1964.⁷ (One corner of the envelope carries a small sketch of a boiled egg and the instruction "3 min.," which one would like to think was evidence that Henderson wrote the notes while waiting for breakfast.)

The notes are not difficult to follow, if placed alongside the published text. They provide a skeleton or outline for the song with the key lines for each stanza, using the abbreviation "FM, FM" from the English-lang-

(<https://www.facebook.com/rob.gibson.562/posts/10201922608819709?fref=nf>).

The South African poet Mazisi [Raymond] Kunene (1930-2006), in exile from 1959, was the ANC's chief representative in London. He was professor of African literature at UCLA from 1975-1992, returning to teach at the University of Natal, and was named poet laureate of South Africa in 2005.

⁴ On Henderson's lifelong anti-racism, see Timothy Neat, "Hamish Henderson" [obituary], *The Guardian* (March 11, 2002), and Neat, *Hamish Henderson, A Biography*, *passim*; and Bort, as above.

⁵ *Scotsman* (November 26, 1969), in Alec Finlay, ed., *The Armstrong Nose: Selected Letters of Hamish Henderson* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996), 182-183.

⁶ Neat, *Hamish Henderson*, vol. 1, 96.

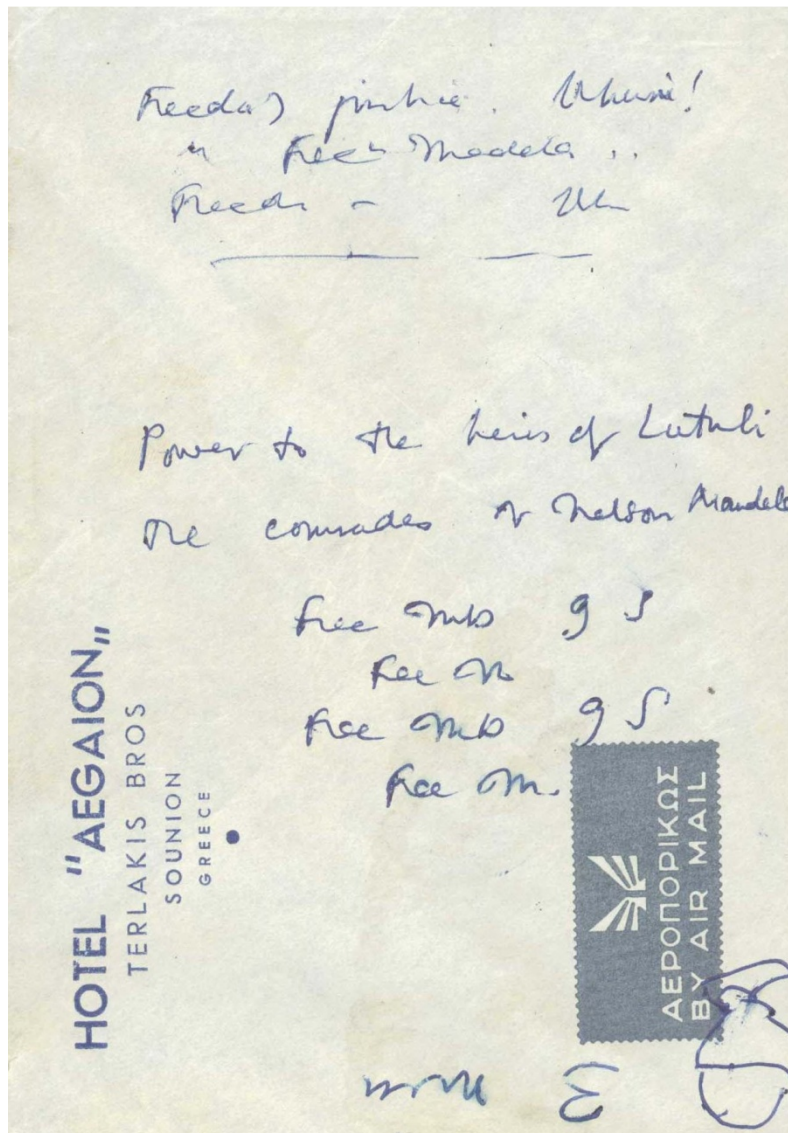
⁷ See Georgios A. Megas, ed., *IV International Congress for Folk-Narrative Research in Athens: Lectures and Reports* [*Laographia (Hellenike Laographike Heaireia)*], 22] (Athens: n.p., 1965); see also Neat, *Hamish Henderson*, vol. 2, 230, and photo facing p. 236.

of the lake and Rivonia
 N.
 L. comrades at on Madala.
 S
~~S~~ e buried alive on a
 island
 R M R M
 S e bu alive

 a few e need d m
 S e ships to need
 m.
 free mbaki S. S.
 R M
 free m h

 Set free 1 man of Rivonia!
 Break down e walls of their prison
 The comrades and their
 of Lutah

Hamish Henderson, notes for "Rivonia"
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Hamish Henderson, notes for "Rivonia" (continued)
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uage refrain (“Free Mandela, Free Mandela”). The abbreviation “FM,G,S,” used here in the second stanza, stands for “Free Mbeki, Goldberg, Sisulu,” referring to three other Rivonia defendants, Govan Mbeki,⁸ Dennis Goldberg,⁹ and Walter Sisulu.¹⁰

They have sentenced the men of Rivonia
R[umbala]
The comrades of N[elson] Mandela

~~They~~ He is buried alive on an island¹¹
FM FM
~~They~~ He is buried alive

V[erwoerd]¹² feared the mind of M[andela]
He has stifled the voice of M[andela]
Free Mbeki G[oldberg] S[isulu]
FM
Free Mb[eki etc.]

Set free the men of Rivonia!
Break down the walls of their prison
~~The comrades and heirs of Lutuli~~
Freedom and justice Uhuru!
[Freedom] for N[elson] Mandela
Freedom – – Uh[uru]

⁸ Govan Mbeki (1910-2001), a leader in the ANC and South African Communist Party; on the editorial board of *New Age* from 1954 till its banning in 1962; Deputy President of the Senate (and then National Council of Provinces), 1994-1999; Glasgow Caledonian University’s Health Sciences Building is named for him. His son Thabo Mbeki succeeded Mandela as president of South Africa.

⁹ Dennis Goldberg (born 1933), leader in the Communist Party of South Africa till its suppression in 1952, the Congress of Democrats (an ANC ally), and then the ANC’s armed wing *Umkhonto we Sizwe*. Imprisoned separately from the other defendants, he went into exile after his release, advocating for the ANC and South African charities in Israel and London. In 2002, he returned to live in Cape Town.

¹⁰ Walter Sisulu (1912-2003), Secretary-General of the ANC, 1949-54, and ANC Deputy President, 1989-1994.

¹¹ The Rivonia defendants were imprisoned on Robben Island, in Table Bay, off Cape Town, which was used to house thousands of political prisoners, and which is now a national (and UNESCO) heritage site.

¹² Hendrik Verwoerd (1901-1966), prime minister of the Republic of South Africa (1958-1966), and, as minister of native affairs in the 1950s, a leader in implementing apartheid.

Power to the heirs of Lutuli¹³
 The comrades of Nelson Mandela
 Free Mb[eki] G[oldberg] S[isulu]
 Free M
 Free Mb[eki] G[oldberg] S[isulu]
 Free M.

One obvious difference between this version of the song and the later published text is that, like the 1964 recording, it lacks Henderson's second stanza, contrasting the defendants' commitment to economic justice with the instruments of Afrikaaner repression:

The crime of the men of Rivonia
 Was to organize farmer and miner
 Against *baaskaap* and *sjambok* and *keerie*.¹⁴

However, the most interesting textual feature of the notes is their treatment of the refrain and language difference. Henderson had based "Rivonia" on the 1930s Spanish republican song at least in part for its political resonance, as linking Mandela to Henderson's own political roots in left-wing, communist, internationalism, and perhaps also in recognition of links between several of the Rivonia defendants and the South African Communist Party. These notes take for granted that the song would keep its original Spanish refrain *Rumbala, rumbala, rumba la* (the opening, and lines 2 and 4 of each stanza), which Henderson later justified as being reminiscent of African drumming. In these notes, this refrain is given as "R," but only in the first stanza, and is otherwise omitted: if the notes were indeed for Henderson's own performance, the refrain would have come naturally to him without written prompting. Later, the Spanish refrain was superseded by quite different African-language refrains, with Henderson's approval; these were not, however, in Mandela's birth-language Xhosa, but in Zulu, ending each stanza with the Zulu equivalent of "Free Mandela," *Mkhululeni Umandela / Umandela Mkhululeni*.¹⁵

¹³ Albert Lutuli [or Luthuli] (1898-1967), president of the Africa National Congress, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1960 (and elected Rector of the University of Glasgow in 1962).

¹⁴ Afrikaans for: white control, whip, cudgel.

¹⁵ The Zulu refrains seem to have been developed by Mphima Yengwa of the South African group Atté; see Neat, *Hamish Henderson*, vol. 2, 188. They were used in the Henderson album *Freedom Come all Ye* (Dublin: Claddagh Records, 1979; see Neat, vol. 2, 236), and printed in *Hamish Henderson, An 80th Birthday Souvenir* (Edinburgh: Chapman, 1999), 45-46. The original Spanish refrains are given in Henderson, *Collected Poems and Songs*, ed. Raymond Ross (Edinburgh:

Also significant in establishing the early date of these notes is the absence from the final stanza of any reference to “Spear of the Nation,” the armed wing of the ANC and the focus of the Rivonia trials. The two later texts both include one reference in English, “Spear of the Nation unbroken,” and one in Zulu *Amandla Umkhonto we Sizwe* (“Power to the Spear of the Nation”), but neither line appears in these notes for the song or in the 1964 Corrie Folk Trio recording. Indeed, the only African word in the version given here is *Uhuru*, Swahili for freedom or independence, more usually associated with the recently-successful East African independence movements in Kenya and Tanzania.

How significant was Henderson’s “Rivonia”? Following Mandela’s death, Robert Gibson, MSP, introduced a motion into the Scottish Parliament resolving, in part:

That the Parliament especially recalls the role of songs and music in spreading the anti-apartheid message; and, in particular from Scotland, it praises the part played by Hamish Henderson....¹⁶

Eberhardt Bort has documented the widespread impact of Henderson’s “Rivonia” outside South Africa, but he has cautioned against making exaggerated claims for impact in South Africa itself: “There are no letters in the Hamish Henderson archive from Nelson Mandela ... there is no mention in any of the books by or on Nelson Mandela that I have consulted.”¹⁷ Neat’s biography does, however, print Mazisi Kunene’s two letters of acknowledgement and appreciation.¹⁸ In 1964, despite Mandela’s eloquence from the dock, and worldwide condemnation of Verwoerd’s policies, the ANC was losing ground with many world political leaders, because of the sabotage campaign, and the United States government had listed *Umkhonto we Sizwe* as a terrorist organization. Henderson’s “Rivonia,” like other protests before and after, was at least a signal to South Africans that world opinion was not monolithic.

Moreover, Henderson’s song, as a response to Mandela’s visionary speech of April 1964, also recognized, perhaps foresaw, the importance that Mandela might hold for future Scottish political developments, in linking the struggle for political self-determination to a broader social

Curly Snake, 2000), 150-151, though see also p. 163, which has a blank where the 1999 glosses on the Zulu refrains seem to have been deleted.

¹⁶ Rob Gibson, MSP, “Scotland and South Africa: Rivonia Remembered,” at: <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/28877.aspx?SearchType=Advance&ReferenceNumbers=S4M-08584&ResultsPerPage=10>. The motion, introduced on December 11, 2013, had the support of 33 other MSP’s, but lapsed on March 11 before a formal vote.

¹⁷ Bort, Henderson Memorial Lecture, as in n. 2 above.

¹⁸ Neat, *Hamish Henderson*, vol. 2 (2009), 191.

vision. Mandela’s famous concluding words followed from his succinct summary of this positive social vision, quoted above: “I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities.” There are striking parallels between the commitment to broad-based human rights, political, civil, and socio-economic, in the South African Bill of Rights (1996) and the rights enumerated in the Scottish Declaration of Calton Hill (2004), especially by contrast with earlier, more narrowly-drawn visions for the Scottish future; similar rights are expected to be included in any future written Scottish constitution. Rob Gibson’s parliamentary motion after Mandela’s death, in characterizing South Africa as the rainbow nation, quoted another statement of Mandela’s that had captured Henderson’s attention: “Freedom is never, but never, a gift from above; it invariably has to be won anew by its own exercise.” Given the nature of apartheid, Scottish political reference to Mandela during the 2014 referendum campaign attracted some criticism as asymmetric;¹⁹ nonetheless, as Henderson’s collaborator and biographer Timothy Neat has commented, “When Henderson sings, ‘Spear of the nation unbroken,’ it is to Scotland as much as South Africa that he refers.”²⁰

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¹⁹ See, e.g., Peter Hain, in *Daily Mail*, September 9, 2014, and *Daily Telegraph*, September 12, reported in *Scotsman*, also September 12.

²⁰ Neat, obituary, as in n. 3; cf. Neat, *Hamish Henderson*, vol. 2, 189.